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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to determine the effect of informal "meet and discuss" procedures on the parties involved in public school district collective bargaining. The authors investigated the relationships between employee organization and employer attitudes, the effectiveness of informal bargaining procedures, and the level of collective bargaining conflict in public school districts. A sample of 37 Pennsylvania school districts yielded 242 "meet and discuss" representatives as respondents. The findings indicate that employee organization/employer attitudes are highly related to the effectiveness of informal "meet and discuss" procedures; the effectiveness of informal procedures are related to reduced collective bargaining conflict; and the use of first-level supervisors in informal bargaining procedures improves employee organization attitudes and the effectiveness of such "meet and discuss" procedures. (Author)

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# The Significance of Informal Bargaining Procedures to the Level of Collective Bargaining Conflict

by

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## Introduction and Purpose

Labor relations in education is a year-round process! However, one of the problems with collective bargaining, as traditionally practiced, is that the parties meet only at contract time, going their separate ways during the life of the contract except when disputes arise. This use of collective bargaining techniques encourages communications only at times of potential high conflict. Pure bargaining is a highly adversary experience in which one party demonstrates and uses its bargaining power to coerce the other party into granting concessions. In addition to the pressures at contract bargaining, grievances that arise under the application of the agreement also can develop increased hostility between the parties as each pursues its case in a win-lose climate.

There are, however, other aspects of bargaining that are available and have been occasionally utilized as an adjunct to or an integral part of the relations between the parties. These aspects of bargaining have evolved from informal prebargaining days when they were the only avenue of employee-management interaction.

They are still utilized today in both private and public sector organizations as informal communications and low-pressure conflict resolution devices. Pennsylvania's Public Employe Relations Act was enacted in an effort to facilitate employe-employer channels of communication through both of these collective bargaining procedures. Provisions are made for (a) mandatory bargaining with respect to wages, hours, and other terms and conditions of employment, and (b) informal "meet and discuss" procedures for matters of discretion or policy where the final decision resides with the school board. As intended by the legislature, the "meet and discuss" procedure is a low conflict process by which lines of communications are established, problems are discussed, and conflict resolution takes place.

This study was designed to determine the affect of the informal "meet and discuss" procedures on the two parties involved in formal collective bargaining.

## Theoretical Framework

Collective bargaining in education presents some unique problems. Most teachers aspire to be professionals, to be permitted to make decisions on a wide range of topics, and to participate in the development of organizational policies. Maslow, Herzberg, and others have classified and ordered human needs indicating that the satisfaction of higher order, motivational, or more self-perpetuating needs can be of greater importance than the satisfaction of lower order needs. Research by behavioral scientists suggests that unrest among teachers may be created by a preoccupation with salary schedules and fringe benefits (lower order need satisfaction) to the near-exclusion of provisions for higher order need satisfaction and self-actualization in their professional work. A study of the literature on school administration since 1945 reveals that most textbooks advocate a form of "democratic administration" or the involvement of teachers in the decision-making process. Chamberlain, in 1951, indicated that the fierceness of negotiations may be reduced through greater employe-employer cooperation. A 1968 report by the American Association of School Administrators supported a dichotomous system of labor relations with some items suitable for negotiation and other items suitable for "advisory consultation." Lieberman, in 1975, reported that the time required at the bargaining table could be reduced if an adequate consultation system functions throughout the year. This research suggests that functional informal systems will reduce the adversary relationships that may occur in formal bargaining. Likewise, the denial of teacher involvement in decision making through informal procedures could result in increased conflict through collective bargaining.

Research Procedures

Three hypotheses were generated to determine the significance of the employe organization and employer attitudes toward each other and their corresponding perceived effectiveness of informal "meet and discuss" procedures. A fourth hypothesis predicted a relationship between the perceived effectiveness of "meet and discuss" procedures and the level of collective bargaining conflict within the district.

An attitude scale developed by Stagner, Chalmers, and Derber in 1958 had been used with more than 2,100 respondents in several labor relations studies. The scale was adapted for educational organizations and repiloted for this study establishing alpha coefficients of reliability of .937 for the employe organization scale and .820 for the employer scale. A "meet and discuss" effectiveness instrument was developed which incorporated both factual questions concerning the process and attitudinal questions to identify the perceived effectiveness of the process.

All Pennsylvania public school districts that negotiated a contract with their professional employe organization for the 1975-1976 school year were categorized based on the level of collective bargaining conflict that occurred in reaching a contract settlement. The categories of conflict were established on a continuum from "Peaceful" (early settlement with no outside assistance) through "High Conflict" (settlement following one or more strikes lasting more than five days). Following this identification of school districts, since the "meet and discuss" procedures described in Act 195 are voluntary, an inquiry was made in each district to determine the existence of such an informal procedure. A study finding at that time was that "meet and discuss" procedures were not being utilized in approximately one-third of the school districts, and only sporadically in approximately an additional third. This identification of district informal collective bargaining procedures then provided a total of forty-one school districts for the study. Proportional samples were drawn from each category of conflict resulting

in the participation of thirty-seven school districts and 242 respondents completing all pertinent data constituting a usable sample of seventy-six percent.

Results

Analysis of the data indicated significant relationships between the employe organization and the employer's attitudes and their perceived effectiveness of the "meet and discuss" process. The employer's attitude toward the employe organization was positively related to the employer's satisfaction with the "meet and discuss" process. The variable produced a correlation of .683 with significance established beyond the .01 level of confidence. Likewise, the employe organization's attitude toward the employer was positively related to the employe organization's satisfaction of the "meet and discuss" process. Significance was established beyond the .01 level and a correlation of .769 was calculated between the variables.

The school district level of collective bargaining conflict and the participant's perceived effectiveness of "meet and discuss" procedures was found to be significantly related. To detail the analysis of this hypothesis, Table 1 is provided for the reader. It can be seen from this display that mean perception scores of both employer and employees decreased as the level of conflict increased. Therefore, the effectiveness of the informal bargaining procedure as judged by the representatives of both organizations was indicative of the formal collective bargaining conflict.

In addition to the use of the analysis of variance statistical procedure, a Tukey WSD follow-up technique was utilized to analysis the differences existing between the conflict categories taken two at a time. As can be seen in Table 1, significance was only obtained in one case.

In addition to the tests of the hypotheses, a significant relationship was found to exist between the major variables and the participation of first-level supervisors on

TABLE 1

ANALYSIS OF CONFLICT CATEGORIES AND THE COMBINED EMPLOYE ORGANIZATION-EMPLOYER PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF "MEET AND DISCUSS"

Analysis of Variance

| Conflict Categories | School Districts | Mean |
|---|---|---|
| A Peaceful | 9 | 50.153 |
| B Low Conflict | 8 | 48.284 |
| C Medium Conflict | 12 | 44.812 |
| D High Conflict | 8 | 40.551 |

| Source of Variation | df | Sums of Squares | Mean Squares | f | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Between Groups | 3 | 451.3 | 150.43 | 3.888 | .017 |
| Within Groups | 33 | 1276.7 | 38.69 | | |
| Total | 36 | 1728.0 | | | |

Tukey WSD

| Category Contracts | Mean Difference | p |
|---|---|---|
| A and D | 9.60 | Significant |
| A and C | 5.34 | Not Significant |
| B and D | 7.73 | Not Significant |
| A and B | 1.87 | Not Significant |
| B and C | 3.47 | Not Significant |
| C and D | 4.26 | Not Significant |

the "meet and discuss" team. In this analysis, it was found that the "meet and discuss" perception and the attitude of the employe organization were significantly related to the presence of at least one first-level supervisor representing the employer. No other management representative; i.e., superintendent, school board member, etc., showed a significant relationship to attitudes or perceptions of either group. This supports the premise that meaningful informal bargaining communication will most likely occur when the lowest level of the administrative structure is involved. As such, first-level supervisors play a primary role in the overall employe-employer relationship within the organization.

## Conclusions and Implications

Based on the findings of this research, the following conclusions can be presented:

Conclusion 1: The attitudes of participants toward the informal "meet and discuss" process play a major role in the employe organization-employer relationship which exists within the school district.

Employe organizations and employers with favorable attitudes toward each other will have a more positive perception of "meet and discuss." Since no causality was sought in this study one could also argue that an effective informal bargaining procedure would be conducive to the existence of improved attitudes between parties. Where collective bargaining is mandated by law, a strictly legalistic approach to formal bargaining procedures with little change in the militant attitudes of both parties will produce the highest level of conflict. Employe organization and employer participants should not have preconceived negative attitudes toward either the opposing side or toward the total collective bargaining process itself.

Conclusion 2: Collective bargaining conflict in school districts is related to the employe organization-employer perceived effectiveness of the informal "meet and discuss" process.

The use of informal bargaining procedures improves attitudes, increases the positive perception of bargaining effectiveness, and decreases the collective bargaining conflict in school districts. Educational leaders should utilize informal procedures to increase the level of communications and affect the bargaining climate. Legislators should consider the inclusion of such informal systems to reduce conflict and the adversary attitudes that usually surround the formal collective bargaining procedure. Energy devoted to informal systems which operate year-round may well be more productive to an educational institution, which depends on a positive climate of human relationships, than energy and expenditures on bargaining strategies and/or outside consultant negotiation expertise. There is likely to be more understanding and less conflict at the formal bargaining table if there has been an informal vehicle used for the development of trust and respect.

Conclusion 3: The use of first-level supervisors as management representatives on informal "meet and discuss" teams is related to more favorable employe organization attitudes and a higher perceived effectiveness of the procedure.

The involvement of first-level supervisors in the informal "meet and discuss" process enhances the understanding of problems and assists in the development of a mutual trust.

Professional employe involvement in the decision-making process improves communications, increases employe morale, and helps to lower the conflict level within the organization. Many administrators have traditionally held that decision making is a managerial prerogative and responsibility. With the advent of collective bargaining in the public sector, the struggle for power has been accentuated. Although legal interpretations suggest that many of the educational issues in question are not mandatory bargaining items, management will be hard-pressed not to negotiate these items if

some informal involvement is not provided. The denial of employe involvement in decision making could result in increased conflict through collective bargaining. Informal communications then become the most important post-negotiation process during the life of the agreement because subsequent negotiations depend upon the relationship established between the two parties at the table and in communications following negotiations. There is likely to be more understanding at the bargaining table if there is communication on a regular basis throughout the life of the contract. It has even been proposed that a good consultation approach can actually serve to reduce the number of grievances arising from the contract. (Munnelly, 1971)

It is probable that collective bargaining will continue to be the primary method to obtain contractual agreements in public education in the future. Informal "meet and discuss" procedures will most likely resolve low conflict items and will become valuable in situations in which the parties have developed a significant degree of mutual trust. As such, the informal process becomes a valuable compliment to formal collective bargaining.

Employe involvement in informal consultation can be just as vital and meaningful as in negotiations. Broader staff involvement through an informal process could result in better decisions with more widespread acceptance and easier implementation, as well as greater identity with the ongoing purposes of the organization. The need for bargaining will not be eliminated, but the fierceness of negotiations may be reduced. Likewise, an informal system will not eliminate conflict but the conflict may be able to be handled more effectively since channels of communication have been established and each party to a possible dispute is more cognitive of and sensitive to the needs of the other.

Education management officials should develop positive employe-employer relationships throughout the entire year. Collective bargaining is influenced, for

better or worse, by the climate of employe-employer relations which exist within the organization. Fifty-two weeks of cooperation and understanding will pay off at the bargaining table. The mutual respect that is needed in a bargaining situation cannot be developed at the table alone; it results from a year-round effort on behalf of both parties. A favorable relationship depends upon an organizational climate of trust, respect, wisdom, honesty, and understanding. Once a feeling of trust is established, both sides can more easily function in an environment that encourages cooperation for attaining mutually satisfactory goals. Therefore, it is conceivable that one of the most effective ways for reducing collective bargaining conflict in education may be found in the functional level of an informal communication process.

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